

# Can Donald Tusk save Poland's weak and divided opposition?



*A scathing Twitter attack on the Polish government has fuelled speculation that European Council President, Donald Tusk, is planning a return to Polish politics to head up the country's struggling opposition. [Aleks Szczerbiak](#) writes that although he remains a dangerous opponent for the ruling party, making a successful comeback would be a long and arduous process, and pinning its hopes on Tusk could distract the opposition from the more pressing task of developing a credible and attractive political alternative.*



Donald Tusk, Credit: [European People's Party \(CC BY 2.0\)](#)

Earlier this month, Donald Tusk launched a blistering Twitter attack on the Polish government, which has been led by the right-wing Law and Justice (PiS) party since it won the autumn 2015 parliamentary election. In doing so, the European Council President fuelled speculation that he is planning a return to Polish politics when his term ends in November 2019, and possibly even sooner. Tusk was co-founder and one time leader of the centrist Civic Platform (PO), Poland's main governing party between 2007-15 and currently the largest opposition grouping, and served as the country's prime minister until November 2014.

His intervention comes at a time when relations between Poland and the EU political establishment are at a low ebb. The Law and Justice-led administration has been in dispute with the European Commission on several fronts, notably over the membership and functioning of the country's constitutional tribunal and the Polish government's judicial reforms. As a result, the Commission has launched a 'rule of law' action under Article 7 of the European treaties, threatening Poland with sanctions including possible suspension of the country's European Council voting rights. Last month, after a heated debate, the European Parliament (EP) also passed a wide-ranging resolution on the rule of law in Poland and started its own procedure aimed at triggering Article 7.

In his tweet, Tusk referred to Poland's 'isolation' and listed a series of charges that the country's opposition has leveled against Law and Justice for months, but he also drew attention to the deterioration in bilateral relations between Poland and Ukraine. Recently, there have been tensions between the two countries over historical issues and this month the Polish Ambassador to Kyiv was summoned by the Ukrainian foreign ministry after an official from the country's commemoration commission was prevented from entering Poland. A reference by Tusk to Moscow's interference in EU countries and Ukraine also suggested that Law and Justice was serving Russian interests; he likened the government's policies to a 'Kremlin plan'.

## EU representative or opposition leader?

Tusk's tweet drew an angry response from the government, who accused him of having done nothing to promote Polish interests in Brussels and plotting a return to national politics after failing to carve out an active role for himself within the EU. The government insisted that it continued to strongly support Ukraine's EU ambitions and that its entry ban on a Ukrainian citizen who, it said, holds 'extreme anti-Polish views', was simply a response to Kyiv putting administrative obstacles in the way of Polish experts' efforts to search for and exhume the remains of Poles killed by Ukrainian soldiers and paramilitaries during the Second World War. Law and Justice supporters robustly denied claims that the rule of law is endangered in Poland, defending the government's actions as necessary to restore pluralism and balance to institutions which, they argue, have been expropriated by extremely well-entrenched, and often deeply corrupt, post-communist elites. They also accused Tusk of having been over-conciliatory in his dealings with Moscow while prime minister.

In fact, the Law and Justice government has clashed several times with Tusk and earlier this year tried unsuccessfully to block his re-appointment as European Council President. It accused him of violating the principle that EU officials should refrain from becoming involved in the political affairs of member states, and exploiting his official position to attack and undermine the Polish government. It is certainly very unusual for an EU leader to attack an incumbent member state government in this way, particularly as the Council President's job is to prepare the summits at which key decisions are made and help to broker deals. Some commentators argued that as a result of his tweet, it will now be easier for Law and Justice to present Tusk's comments as those of a potential opposition leader rather than an impartial EU representative.

## A charismatic and dangerous opponent

Tusk is often mentioned as a possible challenger to Law and Justice-backed incumbent Andrzej Duda in Poland's next presidential election, scheduled for summer 2020. In fact, Tusk saw his popularity slump during the last two years of his premiership and left the country politically exhausted. Law and Justice is also trying to chip away at his credibility by holding several investigations relating to questionable actions taken when Tusk was prime minister, thereby hoping to remind voters of the shortcomings and pathologies of the previous Civic Platform administration. Indeed, knowing that making a successful comeback would be a long and arduous process, it is unclear if Tusk is even interested in returning to front-line Polish politics.

Nonetheless, he remains a charismatic political figure and dangerous opponent who should not be underestimated because his record suggests he has excellent political antennae and an ability to read the public mood. He would be a serious contender for the Polish presidency: opinion polls generally suggest that Duda has the advantage, but some show him running neck-and-neck with Tusk.

As the case of Jerzy Buzek – who was one of Poland's most unpopular prime ministers in 1997-2001 but re-invented himself as a high profile Civic Platform MEP and EP President – shows, it is possible for a Polish politician to reestablish themselves on the national political scene through a high profile EU position. So far, Tusk has emerged unscathed from (and possibly even strengthened by) the various investigations of his conduct as prime minister by presenting himself as the victim of a personal vendetta by Law and Justice leader Jarosław Kaczyński. Mr Kaczyński, who holds no state offices but who many commentators consider Poland's most powerful politician, holds Tusk at least partly responsible for the 2010 Smolensk air tragedy that killed 96 people – including his twin brother, the then-President Lech Kaczyński – and subsequent mishandling of the crash investigation.

## Poland's weak and ineffective opposition

Indeed, Tusk's latest move is particularly significant given that Poland's weak and divided liberal and centrist opposition has so far failed to mount an effective challenge to Law and Justice. As the '[Pooling the Poles](#)' micro-blog that aggregates voting intention surveys shows, Law and Justice is averaging 43% support compared with only 23% for Civic Platform, 10% for the anti-establishment 'Kukiz '15' grouping, and 9% for the smaller liberal 'Modern' (Nowoczesna) party.

Tusk's reentry into Polish politics is, therefore, bad news for current Civic Platform leader Grzegorz Schetyna, his one-time bitter rival for the party leadership. While Schetyna is an effective political operator who has consolidated his grip on the party apparatus, he lacks Tusk's dynamism and charisma and is constantly being undermined by younger Civic Platform deputies close to the previous party leadership. A November survey conducted by the CBOS polling agency found that only 24% of respondents trusted Schetyna, while 46% did not, making him one of Poland's least trusted politicians. An earlier August IPSOS survey conducted for the OKO.press portal found that only 11% of respondents wanted Schetyna as Civic Platform leader compared with 52% who opted for Tusk. It is not surprising that Tusk is probably the only opposition figure who evokes genuine unease within the ruling party.

Moreover, although the liberal and centrist opposition enjoys close links with the EU political establishment and Western opinion forming media, many of whom share their dislike of Law and Justice, its strategy of trying to exert pressure on the government by presenting it as isolated in international institutions such as the EU has proved to be a double-edged sword. Although Poles are overwhelmingly pro-EU, they are also wary of the Union becoming involved in the country's internal affairs and critical of opposition activities that they feel could harm the national interest.

So, for example, Civic Platform and other opposition MEPs were divided over which tactics to pursue in this month's EP debate on the rule of law in Poland: anxious to capitalise on the government's difficulties, but fearful of leaving themselves open to criticism that they were weakening the country's international standing by using a European forum to air domestic political grievances. In the event, most of them abstained but, to the annoyance and embarrassment of the party leadership, six Civic Platform MEPs broke ranks and voted to censure the Polish government.

In fact, a more fundamental problem for the opposition is that Law and Justice's 2015 election victory reflected widespread disillusionment with the country's ruling elite and a strong prevailing mood that it was time for change, and most Poles do not want to see a return to the status quo ante. Meanwhile, the opposition has spent too much time focusing on constitutional issues that are too abstract for most Poles, while failing to offer a programmatic alternative on their more pressing social and economic concerns where Law and Justice is clearly more in tune with public opinion.

For example, having previously argued that the government's extremely popular flagship '500 plus' subsidy programme for the first children of poorer households and every second and subsequent child in all families would place an unaffordable strain on the public finances, Civic Platform has tried to outflank Law and Justice by arguing that the programme should be extended to include every child. However, knowing that in doing so the party risks damaging its fiscal credibility, Civic Platform has also suggested that it will limit entitlements by excluding parents who are not working or seeking work.

This has left the party open to charges of opportunism while simultaneously creating uncertainty among voters favouring greater social welfare spending as to whether Civic Platform is really committed to maintaining the programme. If it pins too many hopes on Tusk returning, then the opposition could waste time waiting for a saviour who may never come while failing to get to grips with the more pressing task of developing a credible and attractive political alternative to the ruling party.

### **The 2018 local elections will be crucial**

The next major test for the opposition will be the autumn 2018 local elections which are likely to determine Mr Schetyna's fate. Civic Platform has the advantage that – in addition to Poland's 16 regional assemblies where elections are fought on strict party lines (and all but one of which are currently controlled by the opposition) – the main focus will be on the results of the mayoral contests in Poland's largest towns and cities, where Law and Justice is relatively weak. The ruling party is hoping to amend the electoral law so that it favours larger political groupings, which should encourage the formation of alliances among the opposition parties.

However, rather than negotiating local or national electoral cooperation agreements, Civic Platform's strategy appears to be based on forcing the smaller opposition parties to support its mayoral candidates. This appears to have worked in Warsaw where the 'Modern' candidate withdrew in favour of the Civic Platform nominee; although this has been questioned by 'Modern's' new, more assertive leader Katarzyna Lubnauer. However, if Civic Platform performs badly then the clamour for Tusk's return will intensify and he may even be tempted to cut short his Council presidency and return to lead the opposition into the next parliamentary election, scheduled for autumn 2019. It is too early to tell if Tusk is actually planning such a comeback, but this month's Twitter intervention was the strongest indication to date that he is.

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*Note: A version of this article appears at Aleks Szczerbiak's [personal blog](#). The article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics.*

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## About the author



**Aleks Szczerbiak** – *University of Sussex*

Aleks Szczerbiak is Professor of Politics and Contemporary European Studies at the University of Sussex. He is author of [Poland Within the European Union? New Awkward Partner or New Heart of Europe?](#) (Routledge, 2012) and blogs regularly about developments on the Polish political scene at <http://polishpoliticsblog.wordpress.com/>